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ABSTRACT

The evaluation of reading in the West Hartford Public Schools is part of a larger evaluation of English/Language Arts. Its purpose is to provide information for program improvement and growth. Using existing data, the reading evaluation focuses on four questions: (1) Does the reading achievement of West Hartford students improve from grade four through grade ten?; (2) What is the pattern of reading strengths and weaknesses within representation grades?; (3) Do Students of all ability groups show similar patterns of growth, strengths and weaknesses?; and (4) How does West Hartford students' reading achievement compare to that of students across the nation? Data from the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (mean percentile ranks by grade and mean percentiles by ability group and by grade for the vocabulary and reading comprehension subtests), the reading subtests of West Hartfords' Diagnostic Language Arts Test (mean percentage correct by grade), and the Test of Cognitive Skills (to identify low, middle, and high student ability groups) were used to address the evaluation questions. Results indicated that students of all ability levels were successfully learning to read. The current focus on improving teaching effectiveness of critical reading comprehension skills should be maintained. (BS)

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AN EVALUATION OF STUDENT READING

Spring, 1983

Edward F. Reidy, Jr.

PURPOSE

The evaluation of reading in the West Hartford Public Schools is one part of a larger evaluation of English/Language Arts. Its purpose and that of the larger study is to provide information for program improvement and growth so that our students will become increasingly more adept in their use of language.

Unlike the earlier evaluation of writing, this evaluation is based on an analysis of existing data rather than on data specifically collected for program evaluation purposes. Whenever existing data is adequate, we will use that data so as to keep the time taken from teaching and learning to a minimum.

QUESTIONS OF INTEREST

This evaluation of reading has focused on the following four questions:

1. Does the reading achievement of West Hartford students improve from grade four through grade ten?
2. What is the pattern of reading strengths and weaknesses within representative grades?
3. Do students of all ability groups show similar patterns of growth from grade four through grade ten?
   Similar patterns of strengths and weaknesses?
4. How does the reading achievement of West Hartford students compare to that of students across the nation?

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PROCEDURES and FINDINGS

The rest of this paper is organized by question. Following the statement of question(s), we provide a description of the procedures used to answer the question(s) and the answers we have found.

A. *Does the reading achievement of West Hartford students improve from grade four through grade ten?*

What is the pattern of reading strengths and weaknesses within representative grades?

To answer these questions we used data from both the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) and the reading subtests of West Hartford's Diagnostic Language Arts Test (DLAS). The CTBS is given each October to students in grades 4, 6, 8 and 10; the DLAS, each Fall and Winter to students in grades 1-8.

Table 1 shows the mean percentile rank scores for students in grades 4, 6, 8 and 10 for both vocabulary and reading comprehension. Percentile rank scores for an individual or for a group indicate the percentage of students in a national comparison group who did less well than the individual or the group of interest. For example, if I obtained a percentile rank of 62 on reading a test, I would know that I scored higher than sixty-two percent of the students who took that reading test. I'd also know that thirty-eight percent of those taking that test scored higher than I.

Before commenting on the percentile rank scores in Table 1, let me argue that successively higher levels of the CTBS measure successively more difficult vocabulary and comprehension of successively more complex passages. Thus, a student's reading abilities must grow if he or she is to succeed equally well on successively more difficult tests. Put another way, if a student obtains the same or nearly the same percentile rank on a reading comprehension test in grades 4, 6, 8 and 10, one can conclude that the student's reading skills have grown or improved over the years. Maintaining one's place in a norm group distribution of scores is evidence of normal or expected growth. This holds for both individuals and for groups.

TABLE 1

Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills

Mean Percentile Ranks

October, 1982

	TEST	
GRADE	VOCABULARY	READING COMPREHENSION
4	78	81
6	75	72
8	77	75
10	78	71

In October of 1982 West Hartford's CTBS mean percentiles in vocabulary for grades 4, 6, 8 and 10 are nearly the same. This means that there is steady growth in vocabulary skills as students move through the grades. However, in reading comprehension the mean percentile scores in grades 6, 8 and 10 are lower than in grade four. This means that reading comprehension skills show less growth and improvement than is expected based on the grade four score. It further suggests the need for more instructional focus in reading comprehension in the later elementary and secondary school grades.

Bear in mind that scores for all grades on both tests are quite high. Also, bear in mind that the above interpretation is not based on following the same group of students from grade four to grade ten. Rather it is based on the assumption that students in each of the four grades are comparable and thus we would get roughly the same scores as if we had followed one group over the years. In short, cautious interpretation is in order.

To determine how much confidence we can place in our interpretations of the CTBS data, we now examine the DLAS data for February, 1983. Table 2 shows the mean percentage of items correct on the vocabulary and reading comprehension subtests for students in grades 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8.

TABLE 2

DIAGNOSTIC LANGUAGE ARTS TEST
Mean Percentage Correct
February, 1983

	TEST	
GRADE	VOCABULARY	READING COMPREHENSION
4	85%	81%
5	82%	82%
6	81%	70%
7	78%	78%
8	80%	74%

Interpretation of the DLAS data is complicated by the fact that not all students in a given grade take the same test level. Furthermore, percentage correct scores are not as easily interpreted as the percentile ranks on the CTBS. Nonetheless, the DLAS data corroborate our earlier interpretations of the CTBS data.

The vocabulary and reading comprehension scores in all grades are quite high. This means our students are learning the successively more complex skills we are teaching them as they progress through the grades.

The vocabulary scores are roughly the same in all grades. The reading comprehension scores dip substantially at grade six and eight. This suggests growth in reading comprehension is not as consistant as in vocabulary.

Clearly, the CTBS and the DLAS data show that West Hartford students do improve their reading skills as they move up the grades. Scores are high in grade four and stay high through grade ten. However, the growth in vocabulary is more consistent than is the growth in reading comprehension.

With regard to relative strengths and weaknesses, reading comprehension scores on the CTBS are slightly lower than vocabulary scores in grades 6 and 8, substantially lower in grade 10, and slightly higher in grade 4. DLAS reading comprehension scores are slightly lower than vocabulary scores at grade 4, substantially lower at grades 6 and 8, and no different at grades 5 and 7. This suggests the need for a greater instructional focus on reading comprehension skills.

B. *Do students of all ability groups show similar patterns of growth from grade four through grade ten? Similar patterns of strengths and weaknesses?*

We answered this question with data from the CTBS and the Test of Cognitive Skills (TCS). The latter test is an academic aptitude test administered each October along with the CTBS in grades 4, 6, 8 and 10.

Using data from the TCS we divided students into three groups: the lower third, the middle third and the high third. We labeled these groups below average, average and above average, respectively. For each group in each grade we computed mean percentile ranks for both vocabulary and reading comprehension. Those means appear in Table 3.

TABLE 3

COMPREHENSIVE TEST OF BASIC SKILLS

October, 1982

Mean Percentiles by Ability Group and by Grade
for the Reading Subtests

	VOCABULARY			READING COMPREHENSION		
Grade	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Below Average	Average	Above Average
4	46	76	83	45	84	94
6	48	70	92	48	73	89
8	47	79	90	52	76	94
10	47	77	93	45	71	91

For the below average group, mean percentiles in both vocabulary and reading comprehension are nearly the same in all four grades tested. This means that there is steady and consistent growth as these students move through the grades.

For the average group, mean percentiles in vocabulary are nearly the same except at grade six. Mean percentiles in reading dip in both grades 6 and 10. While growth in both vocabulary and reading comprehension exhibits itself in high scores, at all grades tested, the reading comprehension scores indicate less growth than do the vocabulary scores.

For the above average group, all scores are very high. The vocabulary scores jump at grade six and stay at that high level. The reading comprehension scores are equally high across all four grades. This means that there is steady and consistent growth as these high ability students progress through their public school careers. In vocabulary the growth is greater than expected based on the grade four score.

With regard to relative strengths and weaknesses within representative grades, it appears that reading comprehension is relatively stronger than vocabulary for average students in grade four, about the same for average students in grades 6 and 8, and weaker in grade ten. For above average students in grade four, reading comprehension is stronger. For above average students in grades 6, 8 and 10 and for below average students in all four grades, there is little difference in vocabulary and reading comprehension scores.

Taken together these data show that students of all ability levels are successfully learning to read.

C. *How does the reading achievement of West Hartford students compare to that of students across the nation?*

In answering this question we used the mean percentiles for the reading subtests of the CTBS shown in Tables 1 and 3. As previously explained, our mean percentile scores indicate how well our reading achievement compares to that of a national norm group.

Prior to commenting on the scores in Tables 1 and 3, let me emphasize that those mean percentile scores represent the scores of virtually all students in the grades tested. Twenty special education students were tested in grade four, twenty-six in grade six, fifty-three in grade eight, and forty-two in grade ten.

The lowest mean percentile score in Table 1 was 71 for reading comprehension at grade ten. This means that our lowest reading achievement level was higher than that of seventy-one percent of the students in the national norm group. Other mean percentile scores in Table 1 range from 72 to 81. Clearly, our students' reading achievement in both vocabulary and reading comprehension is impressive. This is especially true in light of our policy to include students receiving special education services in the computation of our townwide test results.

Equally impressive are the scores by ability group shown in Table 3. Our "below average" youngsters consistently achieve as well as average students in the national norm group. Our "average ability" youngsters are in the top fourth of students nationally and our "above average" youngsters are in the top tenth nationally.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

West Hartford students of all ability levels are successfully learning to read. Our teachers are doing a commendable job of teaching reading.

Current efforts to further improve our effectiveness in teaching reading focus on critical reading comprehension skills. This focus should be maintained.